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The attitude of the Roman nobility toward  
Christianity in the Fourth Century

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THE ATTITUDE OF THE ROMAN NOBILITY  
TOWARD CHRISTIANITY IN THE FOURTH CENTURY

BY

LOIS MAIA MILES

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THESIS FOR THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

IN

LATIN

IN THE

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

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PRESENTED JUNE, 1910

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THE ATTITUDE OF THE ROMAN NOBILITY TOWARD CHRISTIANITY  
IN THE FOURTH CENTURY

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I. Introduction

The final struggle between Christianity and Paganism, which, approximately speaking, covers the time between the accession of Constantine, in 305, and the death of Theodosius, in 395, was a conflict between a belief and a sentiment. For many generations Paganism in its original form had ceased to be a living religion; combined with philosophy and Eastern cults, it served to satisfy in a measure the need of the educated for a hypothesis of life; it covered the bare facts of skepticism, agnosticism, mysticism, and total lack of religious feeling, with a poetic drapery. The real force which combated Christianity was that Roman conservatism and patriotic fervour which were associated around Rome, the Mistress of the World. The men who boasted of their descent from the fugitives of Troy, whose victorious ancestors had trusted in the Immortal Gods for a thousand years, felt a devotion to both ancestors and gods as firm and conservative as was the Roman character itself. The ideal of the Past, its power and glory, was the natural opponent of any belief which threatened to overthrow it. This, then, rather than any conviction of the reality of the gods, seems to have caused the long and stubborn resistance to Christianity.

There were certain reasons why this new cult appeared so dangerous to the Roman mind. In the first place, the members of it





were inclined to neglect their duty to the state; the gravest possible offense in a citizen, as the Romans believed. They were totally incapable of understanding the ascetic ideal which prompted men to withdraw from their duties and selfishly devote themselves to their own salvation. If every one should follow such a course, they argued, what would become of the state? Then too, the Christian maxim of "turning the other cheek" caused no end of contempt and ridicule among the Pagans; they asked what the results would be, were they to adopt measures of this kind in the provinces.

Aside from political questions, the nobility considered Christianity as the religion of the rabble, the "profanum vulgus," and as "anilis superstitio", because they could understand neither the story of its origin, nor its teachings. The Roman system had fostered rather a wide toleration and open-mindedness; all gods were given a place, and each individual or nation was allowed to choose favorite ones without reflection on the virtues of the rest. The fact that the Christians indignantly refused such assimilation, and held themselves rigidly apart, seemed to the devotees of pantheism narrow and fanatical.

Then, too, from the very beginning, the new sect condemned more or less sweepingly that literature which was to Romans the pride of the world. They refused to be assimilated into the great pantheistic system as had cult after cult from the East, and thus it came to a question of open war between all the traditions and glories of the Eternal City, and this comparatively new, but strong and living faith. In so one-sided a contest, there could be no doubt of the event; but as one would expect, the struggle was long and bitter, for tradition is next to religion one of the most



powerful forces in moulding the human mind.

a. Government.- The final issue between Christianity and Paganism seems to have been identified in rather a remarkable way with the fourth century of our era. Though it had begun in all its bitterness long before, and extended for some time beyond this date, the turning-point was fully included within this hundred years.

At the beginning of the fourth century there was no suspicion among the people of the Empire that the seeds of its destruction were already planted and flourishing. Neither was there a general realization of the seriousness of the religious issue; just as people in our own day fail to see the significance of events from lack of perspective, the mass probably thought little of religious differences. Our ideas of the importance of this thought came from the enthusiastic promoters of a subsequently victorious cause, which was at that time, no doubt, regarded much as we do Christian Science at the present day;<sup>1</sup> it had numbers and enthusiasm; it made proselytes rapidly, and was known, - but not understood. The common people of Rome - and Italy - were for the most part a more or less degraded populace, who were willing to be either Christians or Pagans provided they received entertainment, food, and holidays. This is the underlying cause of the fact that they never afforded serious trouble to the emperors who changed the state religion.

In three hundred, Roman power still stood for peace and order. The good roads, the universal language, and the easy tolerance of the Romans, afforded a good field to Christianity. Life in the provinces was peaceful, and even luxurious; still, even in the city, the life was much less corrupt than it was later.<sup>2</sup> A wretched system of taxation ground down all alike. Slavery was a corrupting





influence; trade had grown slack because the nobility considered it beneath their dignity to enter the field of commerce. While the army was still kept up, it was changing its character gradually, as was the whole nation, because of the steady influx of barbarians. Under a close caste system, crushing financial burdens, and the gradual thinning of the Roman population, patriotism was dead among the masses, and survived only in the hearts of the patricians who made a last hopeless stand for the old order of things. Thus, under an apparently flourishing aspect, the government was ready to crumble to pieces.

b. (1) Education.- Education was the one force, which both in the fourth century and in the years succeeding, opposed Christianity with any measure of real success. Even this field had at this time lost some of its influence, because the steady diet of rhetoric was beginning to be inadequate. Idolatry, however, still ruled the schools in the fourth century. All those who went to school studied the great classical masters, Vergil and Cicero, Horace, Terence, Plautus. Thus Christian youth, if they were to be educated, were brought up on the very Heathenism which their creed was fighting. The schools and colleges, moreover, were numerous; even in the provinces every important town had its university; education was general, and consisted mainly of a study of rhetoric based on style of the Pagan authors, and grammar, which included the study of their works. Such a state of affairs could not help but have its effect. Even devout Christians such as Tertullian and Augustine loved Vergil to the end of their days. Undoubtedly this training helped to propagate the sentiment for the past in those not Christians, and caused them to take no cognizance whatever of the change in religion.



University life was somewhat similar to that of today, in all the great centres of learning.<sup>3</sup> The students were gay, disorderly, and reckless, doing unlawful things many times, "nisi consuetudo patrona posset". These care-free youths generally followed one of two lines, antiquarianism or eclectic philosophy.<sup>4</sup>

(2). In accordance with the schools, most literary work had a distinctively pagan note. There were no such great writers as in the first century, but there is little difference in religious tone, with very few exceptions. The field of letters was sterile. It was a world of schools and colleges, but with too much conservatism to be productive.

c. Morals.- The moral ideas contributed by a pagan society as the foundation for the conduct of the fourth century were not so bad nor so inadequate as most people suppose. The writings of Ausonius show this to be a fact by their simple and pleasant account of provincial life. The society of those in the upper circle of Rome itself presents a sufficiently dignified moral tone in the Saturnalia of Macrobius, and in the letters of such men as Symmachus, Praetextatus, and Flavian. To be sure, there was a great deal of vice in certain sets, and among the proletariat, as we gather from Ammianus, but it would be wrong to suppose that this was an especially depraved age. How would our own century and our own society compare with it, under the criticism of a reformer such as S. Ambrose, who has painted us the blackest picture of the fourth century, and who, by the way, seems to scourge the Christian even more than the heathen. As Kingsley so aptly says, in the novel dealing with this period, "De te mutatos nomine fabula narratur". In fact, the general tendency of the Paganism at this time was toward monotheism and higher moral ideas.





d. Religion.- Still, on the other hand, there can not fail to be some effect upon morals from a decadent religion. This change was manifested in what Dill calls the "fluid convictions" of the age. There was no longer alive the spirit of inquiry in which Cicero wrote *De Natura Deorum*. The Pagans were "a crowd of philosophic skeptics, conservative dreamers, and devotees"<sup>5</sup>. The age was full of illusions and self-deceptions due to ignorance and conservatism. The many different shades of mysticism from the East, and the constant evolution and involution of systems of philosophy were like structures of airy nothing built on a foundation of dreams. Herein lay the advantage of the Christians; they knew essentially what they believed.

"The absence of any certainty that life was a permanent value is the canker at the heart of heathenism."<sup>6</sup>

"Underneath its varying moods is the same weariness, the same restlessness, that shows itself today under moods very similar. There is a quest for certainty which is not to be found". Some turned to philosophy, some to religious revival, some to magic.

"We are apt to forget how much paganism was left in the fourth century. It was for the most part quiet and content to be left alone. It included a mixture of every thing and was very different from the original Paganism"<sup>7</sup>.

Diocletian, at the close of the third century, was the last emperor who persecuted the Christians - a rather significant fact in itself. In the year 304 he ordered all Christian books and churches to be destroyed, and Christians to be tortured who refused to burn incense. The edict of death against those practicing Pagan rites came just 104 years later. Within this time, then, the church had won over the mob by its policy of changing the name and



leaving the rite, and the beliefs of the Roman nobles, if not entirely dead, were too weak a minority to struggle against the tide. In the meantime, pagan and christian worked side by side in the machinery of government, and often maintained friendly relations as do people of different beliefs today. There were all degrees of virtue and vice on each side, from the devout St. Jerome to the disgraceful Damasus, and from the spotless Symmachus to the cruel creatures of the court. For instance, the historian of the period, an eye witness, tell us:

*Damasus et Ursinus supra humanum modum ad rapiendam episcopalem sedem ardebant. . . . . Neque ostentationem rerum considerans urbanarum, dietentur oblationibus matronarum, procedantque vehiculis insidentes, circumspecte vestiti, epulas curantes profusas, adeo ut eorum convivia regales superent mensas".*<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, he paints a rather glowing picture of the good rule of Symmachus as Praefect of the city. Life was, as today, a patchwork of contradictions; so that, in order to determine with any accuracy the real status of affairs, and the attitude of those who opposed the new movement, it will be better to study more closely the men of that time, thru the medium which they themselves have left us, their writings, public and private.





## II. (a). Attitude of the Pagan Nobles as Shown by the Law (Theodosian Code)

The best reason for placing the final crisis of the struggle between Christianity and Paganism in the fourth century, is the fact that the attitude of the government underwent a complete change during this time. The century was ushered in, strange to say, with persecution of the Christians, and passed out with persecution of the pagans. During this interval every degree and gradation of the change can be traced in the laws passed by the various emperors, most of which are collected in the Theodosian Code. It is an undoubted fact that there was less difference in the personal opinions of the rulers than one would suppose from the decided tone of the Edicts. The real explanation is to be found, not in the story of Constantine's conversion, but in the steady advance of human thought. Paganism was a dead issue.<sup>1</sup>

In 303 Diocletian issued an edict requiring all Christian books to be destroyed.<sup>2</sup> In 304 followed a law that all who refused to make public sacrifice were liable to imprisonment and torture. This was however, the last spasmodic effort of Paganism as a state religion. Constantine, upon his accession, entered on a policy of toleration which had had little precedent for two hundred years, and was to remain for a long time to come a solitary example. From 311 to 313 he issued a series of edicts,<sup>3</sup> giving freedom of worship to all men, with the one requirement, that they pray for the emperor. Constantine was more of a philosopher than a zealot, and he evidently esteemed the prayers of all, no matter to whom they addressed.<sup>4</sup>

Even at this juncture, it seems to have been necessary to restrain the Christians from doing violence to temples, as is shown



by the following; "Aedem in quo siumlacra feruntur posita artis pretio quam divinitati metuenda, patere publici consilii anctoritate decernimus".<sup>5</sup> There are several edicts thruout the time which indicate that the enthusiasm of the church was likely to find an outlet in this direction. It is natural that they could not appreciate as art something which they considered a danger to their souls.

This almost modern policy of Constantine continued for some time, but gradually there came a change, which may have been due to firmer conviction on his part, or more probably to a realization of the fact that he could not remain neutral without being hated by both sides. At any rate, between the years 341 and 423 there appeared a series of 25 edicts against the practice of pagan rites. The first begins, "cesset superstitio, sacrificionum aboleatur insania".<sup>6</sup> It closes, more than eighty years later, in 423, with a sentence of death against all pagans.<sup>7</sup> In reality, in spite of these harsh laws, a lenient policy was adopted toward those who lived quietly and in outward conformity. The great majority of the nobles who held office were still pagan, and those who were not, were still Romans, and revered the gods and the temples as a part of the past. Then too, in the country districts it would have made any governor extremely unpopular to stop the rustic feast days and holidays. The ones who attempted it did so thru compulsion; they were fighting the traditions they loved and revered with all their hearts. This is the reason why so few strong Romans of the nobility ever became true Christians. The latter were generally a traditionless people, and their first recruits were from the lower classes and people of non-Roman birth. Constantine in 346, shows how the destructiveness of the Christians annoyed him as Roman





emperor, when he said:

"Quamquam omnis superstitio penitus eruenda sit, tamen volumus ut aedes templorum quae extra muros sunt positae intactae incorruptaeque consistent. Nam cum ex nonnullis vel ludorum vel circensium vel agonum fuerit origo exorta, non convenit ea convelli ex quibus populo Romano praebeatur priscarum sollemnitas voluptatum."<sup>8</sup> This is the same man who said "Cesset superstitio". What sympathy could there be between philosophers who could not understand intolerance or violation of the past, and those who could not tolerate anything but enthusiastic and whole-hearted belief in the future?

In 346 appeared an edict which disclosed the key to the whole situation. All temples were to be closed, and any one offering sacrifice was to be punished by the sword; rulers of provinces who failed to enforce this law were to pay a severe penalty.<sup>9</sup> Constantine had recognized why it was that his measures were failing to take effect.

There is a controversy over the laws against paganism during the period between 341 and 356.<sup>10</sup> Some contend that they were never issued;<sup>11</sup> others, that if issued, they were not enforced. At the end of this time comes a law which is significant because it bears Julian's name, and has been used to lend color to the story of his apostasy. However, as he was nothing more than a figure-head set up by Constantius, there is no special meaning to be attached to it. It begins; Constantius et Julianus Caesar; "Poena capitis subiugari praecipimus eos, quos operam sacrificiis dare vel colere cimulacra constituerit".<sup>12</sup>

From this time until 381, there is absolutely no law whatever against pagan ritual, even of a public nature.<sup>13</sup> It was the state





religion, of course, under Julian's short reign, but afterward there seems to have been no strenuous effort against it for a long time.<sup>14</sup> Symmachus and his colleagues held meetings of the pontifical college, feasts to Magna Mater, and to the Vestals, and the worship of Mithra and Isis flourished.

From 381 to 391 appeared four very severe enactments<sup>15</sup> against, I. worshipping images and going to temples; II. use of the oracle; III. (worth repeating exactly because of its wording) *ne quis mortalium ita faciendi sacrificii sumat audaciam ut inspectione iecoris extorumque praesagio . . . . praesentium vel futurarum rerum explorare temptaverunt veritatem*"; IV. *nemo se hostiis pol-lerat, nemo insontem victimam caedat*". A heavy fine was the penalty inflicted.

From 383-391 appeared a series of edicts against apostasy,<sup>16</sup> which are so severe and so numerous as to cause surprise to the modern reader. Both from this and from other sources it seems evident that an epidemic of apostasy raged among the people of the Roman world during the last years of the fourth century. St. Ambrose and St. Augustine both add force to this theory in various writings. Christianity was no longer the religion of the humble and truth-seeking; many courtiers and time servers, as well as rich men who feared disfavor, had adopted the state religion. The priesthood had become rich and luxury-loving; evil had crept into the very monasteries and hermitages. For a while it seemed as though the general corruption of the age would taint Christianity irrevocably, but the deluge of barbarians was still of the future.

Titulary, 7, 1, 381 of the Codex takes from apostates the power of willing property. Titulary 7, 2, in 383, forbids them to inherit property. This practically cut off from money and family



those who changed their religion. Titulary 7, 3, in 383, indicated that the two former had been used to get property from innocent people, and makes this a punishable offense. Persuaders to apostasy were also to be condemned. Titulary 7, 4, in 391, is a repetition of the former, with the addition that those who have profaned the baptismal service cannot be pardoned. In 395, 7, 5 follows the final enactment. "Pereat - perpetua infamia urantur dejecti". So great was the danger from it, that renouncing one's faith had become "the unpardonable sin".

In 391, after the brief rule of Eugenius, the last pagan emperor, Honorius and Arcadius found it necessary to re-enact many of the laws against the pagans, making them even more severe.<sup>12</sup> There was still, however, almost a dead weight of resistance, or at least of inertia, among the officials, especially in the provinces. The law of 391, XVI - 7-5, quoted above, was addressed to Flavianus only three years before he became a martyr for the cause of the gods at the end of Eugenius' rebellion.

In 391-92, several laws appeared against pagan worship in both East and West;<sup>18</sup> laws which would be without a *raison d'etre* had not the ancient religion of the Romans still been fairly strong. To lend color to this idea is the inscription of the same year in which Symmachus is declared "in aeternum renatus",<sup>19</sup> thru the taurobolium. So many people were deserting Christianity for Jewish, Manichee or pagan superstitions that even the laws show the anxiety of the rulers.<sup>20</sup>

In 396 Arcadius and Honorius struck a very real blow at the old religion by repealing the ancient privileges and immunities of the priests - "sacerdotibus ministris praefectis hierophantis





sacrorum vel quolibet alio nomine nuncupantur".<sup>21.</sup>

In 399 appears a provision for public festivals to amuse the people, who have been deprived of their sacred days.<sup>22.</sup> This shows the first touch of tact and foresight for a hundred years. At last the conqueror had realized that even a mistaken and useless attitude of mind cannot be changed by force. With this measure of the Church began the real triumph of Christianity. In 399 also, there is another command, that temples and images shall not be the prey of iconoclasts.<sup>23.</sup> Titulary 10-16 says, "si qua in agris templa sunt, sine turba ac tumultu diruantur. His enim dejectis atque sublati omnis superstitioni materia consumetur."<sup>24.</sup>

In 408 the last strongholds of the old religion were swept away, and Christianity became the only legal one.<sup>24.</sup> In 416 all those publicly dissenting from it were excluded from the army, the law, or any public honor.<sup>25.</sup> The long legal struggle was ended at last, and if the nymphs still peeped fearfully from some rustic grotto, or the love of their fathers' faith clung in the hearts of a few, it was acknowledged as a hopeless cause. They could look only to the past.



## II. b. Attitude of the Pagan Nobles as Shown by the Writers of the Period

1. Historians.- There are several historians of the fourth century whose writings have come down to us, but the most of them are comparatively useless for getting an insight into the religious affairs of the day. Eusebius, a church historian, gives a violent and one sided picture of the times. Eutropius mentions Christianity only once, and the rest ignore it almost altogether. One man, a pagan and a Greek at that, gives us our fairest and most vivid insight into the life of the times, and into the conflict of religions then going on.<sup>26</sup>

Ammianus Marcellinus was born of Greek parents in Antioch about 325 A. D.<sup>27</sup> He must have been of noble birth, for he tells us that he served among the *Protectores Domestici*, who were required to be handsome and noble. In 353 he was at Nisibis in Mesopotamia on the staff of the Roman general Ursicinus. He tells us that he was at that time "*adulescens*". He took part later in the war against the Persians, and after the siege of Amida returned to the East with Julian, who was his idol. He accompanied Jovian in his cowardly retreat after the death of Julian, and lived thence forth at Rome, where he wrote his 31 books of history.<sup>28</sup> Thirteen of these are lost, but the ones remaining cover the period from 353-378. He gives us many life like and amusing pictures of Rome, from which it seems probable that he lived after 290.

Though from various references thruout his work it becomes plain that he was a pagan, his books are the best authority for his time, and deal very justly with the religious situation. Some unknown biographist has written of him: *Etsi enim Deorum cultus mancipatus fuit, quod certe negari non potest, ea tamen fide sin-*





ceritate modestia de Christianorum rebus loquentur, ut nisi ex plurimis locis toto opere sparsis constaret eum cultorem Numinum fuisse, Christianus non immerito posset videri".<sup>27.</sup>

Thru the eyes of this man, then, we may expect to see things as they were. He himself says, at the end of his work, that truthfulness has been his aim: "Haec ut miles a principatu Caesaris Nervae exorsus ad usque Valentis interitum pro virium explicavi mensura; opus veritatem professum, nunquam, ut arbitror, sciens silentio ausus corrumpere vel mendacio. Scribant reliqua potiores, aetate doctrinisque florentes; quos id, si libuerit, ingressuros, procudere linguas ad maiores moneo stilos."

Ammianus was a heathen of the later type; confused but open minded.<sup>31.</sup> He seldom mentions the gods, but speaks of the Caeleste Numen, and evidently believed in the triumph of right. He leaned toward neo-platonism, and believed in signs and auguries. He is unique among his contemporaries, as having absolutely no bitter prejudice.<sup>32.</sup>

He has summed up his own idea of the universe rather skilfully in a little paragraph in the 21st book: "Sol enim, ut aiunt physici, nostras mentes ex sese velut scintillas diffunditans, cum eas incenderit vehementius, futuri conscias reddit."<sup>32.</sup> This is one reason why he believes in the oracle. He also thinks that "Volatus avium dirigit deus, ut futura praemonstret. Amat enim benignitas Numinis, seu quod merentur homines, seu quod tangitur eorum ad fectione, his quoque artibus prodere quae impendent."<sup>33.</sup> His was the attitude, probably, of the great majority of more cultured pagans. They no longer believed in the old gods, but in a "benignus Numen, "whom they could not but think and hope worked "his quoque artibus",





as well as thru the ways of the Christians, to make himself understood. It is a rather pitiful appeal against intolerance.

He makes several references to Christianity, generally in connection with its followers. He did not approve of the way in which Constantine attempted to meddle with church affairs. "Christianam religionem absolutam et simplicem", he says, "senile superstitione confundens, in qua scrutanda perplexius quam compenenda gravius, excitavit discidia plurima, quae progressa fusius aluit concertatione verborum".<sup>34</sup>

Like all the other pagan writers, he shows a certain contempt for the nomenclature of the Church. In one place he says, "through their 'synods' as they call them;" as though with a contemptuous shrug. His feeling was not against the religion, which he calls "absolutam et simplicem", but against the intolerance and quarrelsomeness of its adherents, as he shows again and again. Indeed it must have been rather a discouraging spectacle to see those who claimed to know the secret of eternal life, squabbling over the interpretation of a Greek word, not in a philosophic battle of words, but in a fanatic succession of exiles, persecutions, and even deaths. He tells us about a certain "episcopus" who caused trouble by pouring complaints into the "patulas aures" of Constantine, and remarks scathingly "professionis suae oblitus, quae nihil nisi iustum suadet et leve".<sup>35</sup> It is the old story of people who did not live up to their faith. At another time two bishops became so unpopular that they were burned to death by their people. Julian, who was then Emperor, sent a letter promising to punish them roundly "if they did it again".<sup>36</sup> Such was the attitude of the typical high-born philosopher; he would try to prevent people being burned to death without cause, but he could feel no sympathy with a set of fanatics.



## II. b. Attitude of the Pagan Nobles as Shown by the Poets of the Period

2 The fourth century was the last which produced any essentially Roman poetry. The man who caught most truly the note of the earlier Empire was Ausonius, a typical Roman noble of the fourth century, who will be discussed more appropriately under that heading. His poetry reveals his attitude, that of a merely nominal Christian, very well.

Claudius Claudianus was a native of Alexandria, but a lover of Rome and her traditions, who wrote between 395 and 404.<sup>37</sup> His style is almost classical, resembling Vergil, and his poems are even triumphantly pagan. Written on the old gods and the Altar of Victory, they are addressed to emperors who were attempting to cause the defeat of these very things by Christianity. His direct allusions to Christianity are few, as is the case with most of the cultured men of the old faith.<sup>38</sup> He ignores its very existence for the most part, as in his poems, and in this, as well as his belief in two things, Rome and the sufficiency of the old religion, he is a lively exponent of the views of the Roman nobility, political, social and religious. He had a high place in that society of which he was almost the only literary glory, and he appears to have been respected for his genius at least by both Christian and pagan.<sup>39</sup> Augustine says "Poeta Claudianus quamvis a Christi nomine alienus", while Boethius at a later day describes him as "poeta eximius sed paganus pervacissimus".<sup>40</sup> He was undoubtedly a philosopher and a genius, one of the men who redeem somewhat in our eyes the attitude of tenacious paganism.

Prudentius, on the other hand, is the typical Christian poet of the century in that he represents best the new age then beginning.<sup>41</sup>





He was born in 348, in Saragossa; received the same education as Ausonius and Claudian, and was a typical Roman. He was proud of the Mistress of the World, ruled two cities, and was intensely practical in every-day affairs, as well as broad-minded in his religious views. He was a contemporary of Valentinian, Stilicho, Athanasius, Jerome and Augustine. His words concerning Julian, who was emperor during his boyhood, are worth noting:

"Me puero, memini, ductor fortissimus armis, conditor et legum, celeberrimus ore manuque, consultor patriae; . . . . perfidus ille Deo, quamvis non perfidus orbi"<sup>42</sup>. Withal he was a Christian, and the practical use he makes of his religion gives us some inkling of what the fusion of Roman and Christian ideals could be.

"Christus et influat in pateras

Seria ludicra verba iocas,

Denique quod sumus aut agimus

Trina superna regat pietas."<sup>43</sup>

One other poet there is, who deserves mention for the very severity with which he attacks the Christian faith. Rutilius Namatianus has none of the reserve and cold indifference which was so common.<sup>44</sup> while he never mentions the name of Christianity, he attacks it bitterly and pours contempt on it. He was the last representative of the old pagan tone in literature, and of the patriotic Roman.<sup>45</sup> He seems to have realized at last the hopelessness of his cause, and instead of apathy it arouses vehemence in him.<sup>46</sup> He exclaims: "Atque utinam numquam Judaea subacta fuisset! Pompeii bellis imperiisque Titi latius excisae pestis contagia serpunt Victores que suos natio victa premit."<sup>47</sup> Again, he speaks of monks, whom patriotic Romans especially hated as a manace to civilization, social duty and law:



"Non, rogo, deterior Arcaeis secta venenis? Tunc mutabantur corpora, nunc animi.<sup>48.</sup>" In this outbreak of feeling we catch some idea, perhaps, of the pride and scorn which had kept Christianity at bay for four hundred years.





## II. b. Attitude of the Pagan Nobles as Shown by

## 3. Religious Writers of the Time

The fourth century was fortunate in having at least three great religious writers, Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome, all of whom saw the weak point in the offensive armor of the Church, i. e. the indifference of the higher classes, whether they became nominal Christians or not. They were all men of ability and good judgment, so that in their discussion of the problem we find much which is enlightening. St. Ambrose became the teacher of a group of women from the very cream of the aristocracy near Rome, many of whom devoted themselves severely to asceticism, while their husbands and brothers remained cultivated skeptics.<sup>49</sup> This may seem at first a strange situation, but in the artificial state of society at that time it is not hard to explain. It is much easier for men to remain philosophers and skeptics than for women, who must have some faith on which to rely if they are to remain happy. Girls who turned helplessly from one theory to another were only too glad to catch at the firm fact and the hopefulness of Christianity.<sup>50</sup> Some intellectual women there may have been, such as the wife of Praetextatus, who could delve into the mysteries with their husbands, but in the main, the definite thing had a wonderful appeal. Even men had grown tired and hopelessly bewildered among the hosts of "religions". The men turned to cynicism, the women to fanaticism.

The Christians and pagans of the time were on friendly terms more often than not, just as are most men of different faiths in our own day. The Bishop of Milan is almost certainly the "Ambrosius" of Symmachus' letters.<sup>51</sup> By his genius and character, and by his close contact with the Romans, he probably did more than any



other man to dethrone the old gods.

St. Augustine was sent<sup>a.</sup> to Milan, where he was finally converted, (as a teacher<sup>a.</sup>) by Symmachus.<sup>52</sup> While his most noted works come a little later than the period with which we are dealing, his conclusions logically belong to the fourth century of which they are the outgrowth.<sup>53</sup> His correspondence reveals the singular freedom with which cultivated men on both sides at that time discussed points which we seldom touch upon today. Volusianus, a noted Roman, writes to Augustine, asking how one "to whom the whole universe is scarcely equal, can have been born, slept, eaten, and neglected his world for so many years".<sup>54</sup> The Roman nature was not eminently fitted for the Christian belief, because its conception of the gods was too near the human. Marcellinus, a friend of Augustine's writes to him asking that Volusianus, as a "vir illustris" and a possible convert, be given a satisfactory answer. He tells of Volusianus' difficulty; "turning the other cheek", and like doctrines are "reipublicae moribus contraria". This was another point beyond the Roman comprehension.

In the letter which Augustine writes to Volusianus<sup>55</sup> he attempts to justify both his religion and his friend's faith in him. His answer is in brief: "The things of which you write are trifling; to faith all things are possible". Perhaps this is hardly a fair answer, but it was the only ground, apparently, upon which pagan and Christian could meet. As soon as they descended to controversies, there was no hope of conviction on either side.

On another occasion,<sup>to</sup> Longinianus, the celebrated pagan philosopher, who wrote asking about the Christian beliefs,<sup>he</sup> makes a tactful and able reply.<sup>56</sup> He sees the heart of the trouble, i. e. that the pagans do not strictly define, even to themselves, what they





really do believe. Their theories may be ornamental, but scarcely useful as a working hypothesis. In the beginning Augustine quotes Socrates, then the Old Testament - "longe antiquior prophetica". He ends by a challenge to the philosopher to tell just what he believes.

The answer is typical of the pagan attitude, polished and graceful, but hardly definite.<sup>57</sup> He says of God; "est unus, universus, incomprehensibilis, ineffabilis, indefatigabilis Creator, impletus virtutibus quos, ut verum est, angelos dicitis, vel quid alterum post Deum vel cum Deo, aut a Deo, aut in Deo." He says "medius fidiis", however, and confesses himself a pagan quite freely in spite of his evident admiration for Augustine, whom he calls "Romanorum vir optime". His attitude on the chief point of Christianity is very interesting and significant: "De Christo autem tuae iam credulitatis carnali et spiritu Dei, per quem in illum summum, beatum, et mirum patrem ire securus es, domine pater percolende, non audeo nec valeo quid sentiam exprimere, quia quod nescio, difficillimum credo definire." He goes on to ask for information, but probably with very little hope or wish of being convinced.

St. Jerome was born in Asia Minor, of good family - "nobile genere ortus",<sup>58</sup> and trained under the grammarian Donatus, and the rhetorician Victorinus. He was learned, but a very strict disciplinarian, and disapproved thoroughly of pagan literature, though he was never able to eradicate his own love for it. He even goes so far as to say: *Daemonum cibus est carmina poetarum, rhetoricum pompa verborum*". He knew many of the aristocracy, especially the women, intimately. To Laeta, wife of Julius Toxotius and daughter of Albanus the Pontifex Maximus, one of the bluest-blooded patri-



cians, he speaks concerning the education of her little daughter Paula.<sup>59</sup> When Albanus takes the little girl on his lap to hear her sing "Alleluia", he thinks the "infidelis" surrounded by such an atmosphere is "candidatus fidei". Such a pleasing picture of home-life helps us to understand, better than anything else, the fact that society differed little from that of today. "Fiunt" he adds, non nascuntur Christiani". This may be true, but it seems plain that pagans were born pagan, with a strong prejudice, no matter how inagressive, to the faith of their fathers.

In the same letter he tells Laeta hopefully of the conversion of her relative, Gracchus,- "nobilitatem patritiam nomine sonans, cum Praefecturam gereret Urbanam, nonne Speciem Mithrae et omnia portentosa simulacra quibus Corax, Nymphus, Miles, Leo, Perses, Helios, Dromo, Pater initiantur, subvertit, fregit, excussit; et his quasi obsidibus ante praemissis, impetravit baptismum Christi."

Evidently this was quite an unusual case from the emphasis put on it and the lack of similar stories. At the close of the fourth century, the majority of the patricians were still pagan at heart.





## II. b. The Attitude of the Pagan Nobles as Shown by

## 4. Secular Prose of the Century

The field of secular prose in the fourth century is not large, and the references to Christianity are few indeed. Most of the pagan writers either ignore it or dismiss it with a scoff.<sup>60</sup> "The part of a Roman gentleman was to live in the past rather than the present".<sup>61</sup> The orator Macrobius, for instance, never alludes to the subject even indirectly, though he must certainly have known something of it.<sup>62</sup> Libanius lived a long life as head of his profession at Athens, and was always an adherent of the old gods from choice and temperament rather than conviction; however, he always opposed persecution of any kind.<sup>63</sup>

A more positive attitude is taken by Maximus, a grammarian and friend of Augustine. He wrote to the latter in 399 a carefully worked<sup>out</sup> vindication of his own position and of why he disliked the Christians. A brief of it follows:<sup>64</sup>

1. He allows that there is one god over all, without beginning or end, whom, while we seem to worship him, we comprehend only in part.

2. He dislikes the Christians because,

- a. They claim that their god belongs to them only.
- b. They claim to see him in visions.
- c. They neglect their public duties.

This was the attitude of the pagan scholar of the day. As a citizen he could not comprehend lack of patriotism, nor as a philosopher, lack of toleration and of broad-mindedness.



### III. Attitude of the Nobility as Shown by the Lives and Writings of Representative Members

On the preceding section an effort has been made to show, by a general survey of the literature of that period, the religious status and opinions of the patricians in the fourth century. There is only one way in which we can gain a truer estimate, i. e. by studying through their letters and other writings representative members of this class, who may or may not have been literary men. Needless to say, the Roman nobility was not any longer composed entirely of residents in the Eternal City, nor even of Italians. For more than 200 years Roman citizenship had been the property of all who bore Rome's yoke. The old names, The Gracchi and Scipios and Manlii, had died out. Even the best-born could not trace their ancestry with certainty beyond the first years of the republic. In view of this, several men have been selected who were of the highest social position, the best family, and the greatest political prominence. From a discussion of them we can gain some idea of what life really was among the aristocracy.

#### a. Flavianus Claudius Julianus Augustus

Because of the fact that the Emperor Julian was the descendent of some of the noblest families at Rome, and also because he identified himself with the interests of the past, his actions are very significant as indicating the trend of thought among his class. On the other hand, of course, it must be remembered that he is not a typical Roman, because he was brought up and educated in the East, and was always an imitator of the Greeks.

Julian was born in 831.<sup>1</sup> He was a younger cousin of Constantius, on whose accession practically all of the family were put out of the





way except himself and his half brother Gallus. They were kept prisoners in Macellum, Cappadocia, for six years,<sup>2</sup> after which Gallus was recalled as Caesar by Constantius and shortly put to death. In 855 Julian went to Athens to receive an university education. He was already a pagan at heart, although a nominal Christian because by Constantius' orders he had been brought up in that religion.

Just as the young nobleman was beginning to grow settled in the philosophic life, he was appointed Caesar by his never resting cousin, and dispatched to Gaul.<sup>3</sup> Probably Constantius expected to see him rush into ruin as Gallus had done; certainly he had little training or preference for such a life, so that his chances of failure were ten to one. Still, surprising as it may seem, he succeeded in spite of many obstacles, not passably, but gloriously. Gardner says "The secret of his success is to be found in the possession of an iron will controlled by a stern sense of duty, and an unswerving faith in the final triumph of good over evil."<sup>4</sup>

In 360, Constantius, who was in the East, sent to him demanding the best part of the soldiers with whom he had subdued and was holding Gaul. His conduct at the time seems to have been exemplary; he endeavored to reason with the Emperor, and failing, prepared to send the unwilling Gauls to the East. They immediately rose in rebellion and proclaimed him Emperor. After much hesitation he was forced to accept, and was crowned with a soldier's bracelet.<sup>5</sup>

In 361 Julian and Constantius marched against each other, but fortunately for the state Constantius died en route, and the ending was a peaceful one. The first move of the new Emperor was to proclaim toleration for all religions. He really tried to carry out this policy, for he recalled the Nicene exiles, and did nothing to disturb the Christians who stood for all that had been horrible in



his life.

He saw the weakness of Paganism; that it had no settled nor definite belief, no organization, and lacked morality. He endeavored to found a "church" as it were, for the pagans, in which he wished to install the high ideals of the Christians and combine with them a philosophic creed of his own. From the very indifference and lethargy of most of his adherents the attempt was doomed to failure.

Julian was not a skeptic, and he was not a believer in the old gods, whom even the Christians believed at this time to be real.<sup>6</sup> He said of himself, "I am an attendant of King Helios. Just as there is one Truth, and one Wisdom, do not be surprised that we pursue the same Truth and Philosophy by many different roads."<sup>7</sup> He was a monotheist on the neo-platonic style; a philosopher with an innate love for the old culture. He believed the God of the Jews to be the same as his own, but he despised that race for their want of toleration and refinement.<sup>8</sup> Ammianus tells us that he assured the Christian priests they need fear no wild beasts nor torture, but could pursue their worship "in tripidi". He did not want them to be made martyrs, because he saw that it strengthened their cause.<sup>9</sup>

His opinion of the religion against which he fought so hard is rather interesting. He resented the idea of a jealous God, thought the Decalogue inadequate, and could not understand the "Word made Flesh". He despised the idea, then common, of being saved by a baptism put off till the last moment. He upbraided the Christians bitterly for their quarreling, and quoted their own scriptures against them. Finally he could not understand their worship of Christ as monotheistic.





Still, with all his high beliefs in the unity of Good, the Emperor was rather superstitious; Ammianus says "Hostiarum tamen sanguine plurimo aris crebritate nimia perfundebat. . . . oscinumque et augurium et ominum fides, si reperiri usquam possit quaeretur."<sup>11</sup> He tells also of Julian's sacrificing to Apis.

Finally the Emperor returned to the East to carry on his campaign against Christianity.<sup>12</sup> There were many pagans in Antioch, but they could no more be turned from their life of pleasure by Julian than by the Christians. They hated him for his virtues instead of admiring him for his belief. He left the city with a vow never to return, and went against the Persians, where he met his death in 363.

As time passed Julian had seen that he could apparently make no headway against the church.<sup>12</sup> It was probably by his knowledge of this, and by his feeling that the Christians were unjust in at once condemning and using the classics, that he was impelled to the only intolerant act of his reign. In 362 he issued a decree that Christians should not teach the ancient literature,<sup>13</sup> since it was not honorable nor according to their religion to teach what they did not believe. Many famous teachers, among them the learned Victorinus, gave up their profession, and there was great indignation thruout the Church. Even the calm Ammianus says: "illud autem erat inclemens, obruendum perenni silentio, quod arcebat docere magistros rhetoricos et grammaticos ritus Christiani cultores." Julian was his model, but he does not commend this act. It cannot be claimed to be otherwise than unjust, but it shows very clearly his bitterness against those who despised all that seemed best to him, and yet did not hesitate to use it against their opponents.<sup>14</sup>

Julian's reign did nothing to reinstate the old gods; it only served to show how hopelessly dead was their cause. His belief





was a compound of Eastern mysticism, Greek philosophy and Christian ideals, but it gave nothing on which the majority could rest conviction. He cannot be blamed for his failure, nor is he to be reproached for his attitude toward progress. With all his shortsightedness, he perceived what was hidden from most men of his time, the loss to civilization from the passing of the old culture. "In the triumph of Christianity he foresaw the Dark Ages. We cannot wonder that he did not see the Renaissance on the other side".<sup>15</sup>



## III. b.- Q. Aurelius Symmachus

Quintus Aurelius Symmachus is the typical example of a Roman noble in life and thought. He was born at Rome in 340, received the regular education of his class, and underwent the usual career of office. He was Proconsul of Africa in 373, Consul in 391, and Prefect of the City in 387. Riots occurred several times during his tenure of office, but he seems never to have been in danger. His last years were passed in leisure and literary work. He died in 402.<sup>16</sup>

Symmachus' letters are as calm, polished and uneventful as his life. Little history can be learned from them. Apart from the affair of the Altar of Victory, and accidental allusion to a bishop or two, he does not even notice Christianity.

He was very wealthy.<sup>17</sup> It is said he owned three villas near Rome, five on the Bay of Naples, besides several others in different parts of Italy. His range of interests, however, was not large. He took care of his estate, lived happily with his family, of whom, as his letters show, he was extremely fond, and discharged his official duties conscientiously. Ammianus says he was a good Prefect, and well liked by the people although they afterward burned one of his villas because the corn-supply failed.

Like Claudian and Macrobius, he simply ignored any religious change.<sup>18</sup> In his circle, which is better known than that of any other leader of his time, the only striking thing is the intermixture of pagan and Christian, with a reticent suppression of all differences on religious questions. Among cultured and well bred people evidently the same attitude was common as in our own day.





Still, that there was a current of deep feeling under this apparently calm surface is well attested by the affair of the Altar of Victory, one of the most interesting and significant occurrences of the fourth century. The statue of Victory, which had stood in the Senate chamber since the early days of the Empire, and to which sacrifice was made on occasions of public rejoicing, was removed by the Emperor Gratian in the year 382.<sup>12</sup> The pagan members of the Senate, who apparently formed no small minority, protested against this insult to tradition. As was right and natural, Symmachus was the leader in the plea which is notable as the last formal and public protest of dying Paganism.<sup>20</sup> It has the genuine fourth century spirit of skeptical tolerance and old Roman conservatism, but it is nevertheless an eloquent and pathetic appeal.<sup>21</sup> Even the Christian members were so touched by it that they signed the petition for the return of the Victory, but in vain.<sup>22</sup> This document, the "Third Relation" of Symmachus, is so interesting that it deserves special study. It is the only defense of the old faith by one of its representatives which has come down to us.<sup>23</sup> It begins: Q. Aurelius Symmachus, P. V., D. D. Valentiniano Theodosio et Arcadio semper Augustis. Noster autem labor pro clementia vestra ducit excubias."<sup>24</sup>

He goes on to say that he has been chosen to represent the Senate in this plea, and that he asks only for tolerance. He says of the body in behalf of whom he is speaking; "Nulla est hic dissensio voluntatum. . . . Repetimus igitur religionum statum qui rei publicae diu profuit; certe numerentur principes utriusque sectae sententiae; proximus eorum caerimonias patrum coluit, recentior non removet."



He asks who cares more for the glory of the state than Gratian himself. The Altar adds greatly to that glory. "Quis ita familiaris est barbaris ut aram Victoriae non requirat? Cauti imposterum sumus, et tristium rerum ostenta vitamus, reddatur nomini honor qui numini denegatus est," - a rhetorical flourish.

He pleads with the Emperor not to turn from a tried friend, and to abstain from laying violent hands upon the ornaments of the temple. "Praestate, oro vos, ut ea quae pueri suscepimus, senes posteris relinquamus. Consuetudinis amor magnus est."

Having thus appealed to the sentiment of the Emperor, he goes on to touch his pride. What will preserve his glory after the awe inspired by the renowned altar has melted away? Even Constantine did not take away the rights of the patres, for "Vidit placido ore delubras, cumque alias religiones ipse sequeretur, has servavit imperio. Suus enim cuique mos, suus cuique ritus." The last is a very modern idea.

He goes on: Varios custodes urbibus cunctis mens divina distribuit. Iam si longa aetas auctoritatem religioni facit, servanda est tot saeculis fides, et sequendi sunt nobis parentes, qui secuti sunt feliciter suos". Here at last, in a few words, is the root of the whole matter; the idea that lay beneath the obstinate persistency of paganism; this was the attitude of the Roman nobility - men to whom "Roma Dea" was the greatest article of faith.

He next pictures Rome standing to plead for her ancient rites, a most effective figure, and the strongest possible appeal to a Roman. "Optimi Principes, patres patriae", she implores, "reverenini annos meos, in quos me pius ritus adduxit, ut utar caerimonis avitis. Hic cultus in leges meas orbem redegit; haec sacra Annibalem a moenibus, a capitolii Senonas repulerunt. Ad hoc ergo





servata sun ut longaeva reprehendar? Sera et contumelios a est emendation) senectutis. Ergo" - final plea - "diis patriis, diis indigetibus pacem rogamus.

Again he comes back to the plea for tolerance. "Eadem spectamus astra, commune coelum est, idem nos mundus involvit.....Uno itinere non potest perviniri tam grande secretum." He is no longer asking for public privileges or recognition, but only for the right to keep the ancient traditions peacefully, while at the same time he works for the good of the state. Instances follow in which famine and disaster came in the wake of neglect of the gods.

The ending is very forceful and dignified; it might almost be read as a warning. "Be generous" he exhorts, "to the shrines of all sects, but especially to the one which helped your fathers, defends you, and is cherished by us. We wish to preserve the faith that has preserved your race and given it heirs."

In a letter to his closest friend,<sup>25</sup> Agorius Praetextatus, after the failure of this plea, he defines what he considers the proper position of a high-born noble. He should conform to the law, but should bear himself freely and show no fear, since his own security is a small matter. "Nunc aris deesse Romanos genus est ambiendi." Evidently "Romans" to Symmachus were "caelicoli."

In 391 he again made an effort to have the altar restored, but Valentinian held firm, and he was hurried away from Milan. After this he evidently gave up all effort as useless, and lived his few remaining years in philosophic retirement. Of him Prudentius says:

"O linguam miro verborum fonte fluentem, Romani decus eloquii, cui cedat et ipse Tullius. Os dignum aeterno tinctum quod fulgeat auro, si mallet laudare Deum, cui sordida monstra praetulit, et liquidam temeravit crimine vocum."<sup>26</sup>





## III. c.- Vettius Agorius Praetextatus

Vettius Agorius praetextatus was born at Rome in 330, and lived there practically all his life. He was probably, next to his friend Symmachus, the most eminent of the pagans in Italy. He was a scholar, antiquarian, philosopher and mystic. Julian made him proconsul of Achaia, Theodosius appointed him praetorian Prefect, and he was Consul Designatus when he died in 385.<sup>27</sup> As prefect of the city he calmed the quarrel of Damasus and Ursinus over the papacy by his fair dealing. "Cum nihil ad gratiam faceret, omnia tamen gratia viderentur quae factitabant."<sup>28</sup>

While praetextatus never mentions Christianity in his extant writings, there is no doubt as to his attitude. Jerome describes him thus: "Miserabilis praetextatus qui consul designatus est mortuus, homo sacrilegus et idolorum cultor, solebat ludens beato papae Damaso dicere; facite me Romanae Ecclesiae episcopum et ero protinus Christianus."<sup>29</sup> Ridicule like the above was often provoked from the Pagans by the luxury and pride of merely nominal Christians. This man evidently saw humor in the situation, since he could joke with the Pope about it. Verily, times have changed little!

He was also one of the most prominent worshippers of Isis, Mithra, and Magna Mater. In the Saturnalia, however, he is represented as explaining that under all the names of the Pantheon, it is the attributes of one great power that are worshipped.<sup>30</sup> He was a model of public and private virtue in the opinion of all; on his monument are recorded his various honors, such as augur, Priest of Vesta, Curial of Hercules, devoted to the Eleusinian mysteries, neocorus, pater patrum, tauroboliatus, etc. These were the things



with which many minds occupied themselves, when philosophy proved too unstable a prop.

S. petronius Probus, a friend of both Symmachus and Praetextatus, was one of the wealthiest and most successful Roman nobles.<sup>31</sup> He claimed descent from Aeneas, and believed himself the most important man in the state. Ammianus infers that greed and ambition were his chief characteristics. In speaking of Probus' great wealth he adds: "juste an secus non est judiciioli nostri".<sup>32</sup> Vain, timid to the daring, revengeful, unforgiving, he was a mocker of all religions, although he claimed to be a pagan all his life. On his death-bed he was baptised, "donatus senior munere Christi"<sup>33</sup> - says the inscription. At any rate he is an example of what some of the most patrician of Rome's sons had become under the old regime.





## III. d.- V. Nicomachus Flavianus

One great supporter of the pagan beliefs remains to be mentioned, the man who at the close of the century, suffered martyrdom for his faith, V. Nicomachus Flavianus.<sup>34</sup> He was twenty-seven when Julian came to the throne; under him and his successor Gratian Flavianus enjoyed great honor. In Theodosius' time he was again at court, having been in disgrace during the interval.

When Valentinian II. was murdered and Eugenius became Emperor, 394-6, he was the soul of the last pagan revival.<sup>35</sup> He was a sincere believer in the old gods, and the greatest living master of divination. By his efforts the Altar of Victory was once more restored to its place, and many Christians were bribed, as it were, to apostasy. He staked his all on the cause he loved, and lost. After the defeat of Eugenius at the river Frigidus he took his own life, "more maiorum".

By an assumption of indifference and pessimism he had been popular with several Emperors of the Christian faith, but under this assumed mask he was full of fire for the cause. His energy might have been a wonderful help to the state in an earlier time. He was both a historian and a philosopher, "one of the band who, when paganism and letters were perishing, combined in a single love the literature and religion of the past."<sup>36</sup>



## III. e.- Decimus Magnus Ausonius

The poet Ausonius may fairly be called one of the patricians of the fourth century, although he was born and spent the greater part of a long life in Gaul. He was considered the equal of Vergil by his age,<sup>37</sup> about which he tells us a great deal more than most of his contemporaries, and herein lies our interest in him. He was born in 310 at Bordeaux (Burdigala), the son of the leading physician. His life roughly covers the time from Constantine to Theodosius, the period under discussion. From 320 to 328 he was educated by his Uncle Arborius at Toulouse, after which he returned to his birth place. In 334 he became a teacher of "grammar" at that time a synonym for "a liberal education".<sup>38</sup> At twenty-four he became a professor. Probably Julian's decree was not felt so much in the West, so that Ausonius was probably not questioned at this time, or perhaps his position and influence were such as to exempt him. At any rate, he does not mention the matter.

In 369, as the tutor of Gratian he made the acquaintance of Symmachus (with whom he afterward carried on a correspondence) and of the aristocratic circle which considered Symmachus as its center. Ausonius was a learned man, but hardly a talented one. His only really good poem, the Mosella, was written in 371, and is remarkable for its modern and sympathetic treatment of nature. However, he was considered a genius by his friends, and received more approbation from the patrician circle in which he moved than many a better poet. His very mediocrity and kindly "cleverness" probably made him popular.

When Gratian came to the throne in 375, Ausonius rose to power. He was first Prefect of Gaul, in 379 Consul, his greatest pride, tho an empty honor. After Gratian's death at the hand of Maximus,





the old poet spent his last years in his native city, versifying to the end. In one place he says rather pathetically, "non habeo ingenium, Caesar sed iussit, habebo."<sup>39</sup>

Ausonius' religion is rather uncertain and shadowy. He was a professed Christian, but not a zealous one. He was much annoyed because his favorite pupil, Paulinus of Nola, decided to give up wealth and fortune to become a monk.<sup>40</sup> He could not understand it. He might be called a literary pagan, for it is certain that in some of his pictures in the Mosella, he has for a moment caught something of the old Greek spirit, and shows more life and vitality than any where else in his writings. In a letter to Symmachus, a marvel of rhetorical flattery and a typical example, he advises his sterner and more serious friend not to question the religious policy of the Emperor, but to continue in his studies. Such was evidently his own plan.<sup>41</sup>

The only very direct reference he makes to Christianity is in his Ephemeris, a story of the day's work. After calling his slave in "hasty iambs" he begins his morning prayer, a curious mixture of terms and sentiments.

"Foculumque vivi cespites  
Vanis relinquo altaribus.  
Deus precandus est mihi  
Ac Filius summi Dei  
Majestas unius modi  
Sociata sacro Spiritu  
Et ecce iam voto ordior;  
Et cogitatio Numinis  
Praesentiam sentit pavens.  
Pavetne quidquam spes, fides."<sup>42</sup>



He goes on to mention the fact that he makes no sacrifice, much in the manner of one speaking to reassure himself. The prayer itself, short and conventional, follows. At its close, with evident relief, he exclaims:

"Satis precum datum Deo!"

On the whole, it is quite evident that he had to hold onto his Christianity with both hands. Although his intentions and wishes are the best in the world, it is hard indeed for a life-long teacher and admirer of Vergil, a lover of art, and a member of the equally pagan and patrician circle of Symmachus, to be always mindful of his adopted faith. Like the other nobles of his time, so far as he knew himself, Ausonius stood for the Past.





## IV. Summary

## a. The Relations of Christian and Pagan

In the preceding pages have been discussed the lives, and what is more important, the thought of many of the most prominent men, in literature, politics, and religion, upon the chief problem of their age, that of a satisfying faith. There can be no doubt that it was a great and vital question; the very air was full of it, and of the necessity for its solution. The old gods were dead; Oriental mysticism failed to satisfy the minds of thinking men, philosophy and Neo-platonism were fascinating, but failed to warm the cold heart. A new religion there was, which, its adherents claimed, satisfied both mind and heart. The great problem was, could this, the only really vital faith, adapt itself to the Roman nature in such a way as to win against tradition.

Yet it is not to be supposed that this struggle was any more evident to those living in that age, than is the religious conflict of today to us. For the most part men lived together amicably, ignoring the chasms between one another's beliefs. St. Ambrose wrote to Symmachus, St. Augustine to Longinianus. St. Jerome had a very friendly feeling for old Albinus, the hoary Pontifex Maximus. Only now and then did the great depth of feeling hidden below the surface make itself evident, as when a naturally reticent man cried out, "We ask only peace for the old gods".<sup>1</sup> In our own time, scant as is the trace of such a struggle in a polished and conventional literature, we can see much more plainly the outlines of the conflict.

b. Numbers on Each Side.- There is in reality no way of estimating the relative number of the pagan and Christian aristocracy.



That the great body of the people were at least professing Christians is proved by the fact that the Emperors, none of whom were personally enthusiastic, had made Christianity the state religion.<sup>2</sup> Probably the majority of the blue-blooded Romans still clung to the faith of their fathers either openly or at heart. It seems certain that such a long succession of harsh laws against heathenism must have had some cause, and this cause, it is tolerably clear, was the silent, steadfast, unabating opposition of the old nobility who held office under and despised the emperors.

c.- The Passing of Paganism.-

No date can be set on which Paganism was a thing of the past. It melted and faded away like a reluctant mist, and long after every one supposed it gone, still clung in secluded valleys and grottoes. The end of the fourth century saw it confessedly a lost cause, but still laws were enacted against it for a quarter of a century. A hundred years later, indeed, there were men in whose hearts still lurked with its glory and its pathos, that illusive thing, the love of the past. Even today we celebrate our greatest festival on the day of the old Roman Saturnalia, and grace with the name of a saint many another old pagan holiday. A faith, or rather a tradition, which clung so tenaciously in the minds of men, must have contained some grain of right and truth.

Yet while Paganism appeared to linger, it was the shadow rather than the substance; it passed with its supporters, for the pagan nobility had no existence after the barbarian invasions. The name of Symmachus has no successor; the Altar of Victory has long since been forgotten.





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